

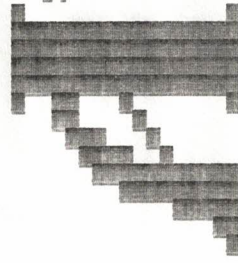
# FROM RUSSIA WITH WIFE

When Andrew  
Kilgore went to  
Moscow as a  
student, was  
married, was  
the last thing  
on his mind.

GOTO #

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S THE bus drove up to the huge building along massively wide roads, I felt for a moment like Gulliver arriving in the land of the Brobdingnagians.

Everything is on a gargantuan scale in Moscow, the skyline dominated by the "wedding cake" architecture of the Stalin period and the tower blocks of Khrushchev's time, the streets as wide as valleys.

My home for a year, Moscow State University, brooding on the Lenin Hills, is perhaps the best architectural...

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..example of Stalin's  
grand vision of the future.

Everything is huge except  
the people: small  
silver-teethed bureau-  
crats who bark at you  
whenever you need to go  
through a gate that  
requires a pass (which  
is often) or whenever  
you need to approach  
the pervasive bureau-  
cracy for any of the  
many pieces of paper  
you need to live in the  
Soviet Union.

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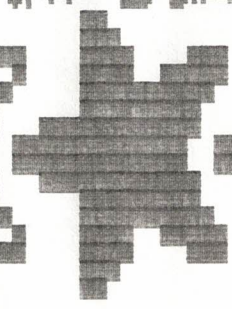




Especially formidable are the babushki (grannies) who beligerantly thrust their round girths at you and demand your papers.



And thus, a few years ago, I arrived at the university to study Russian. And what a stay it was!

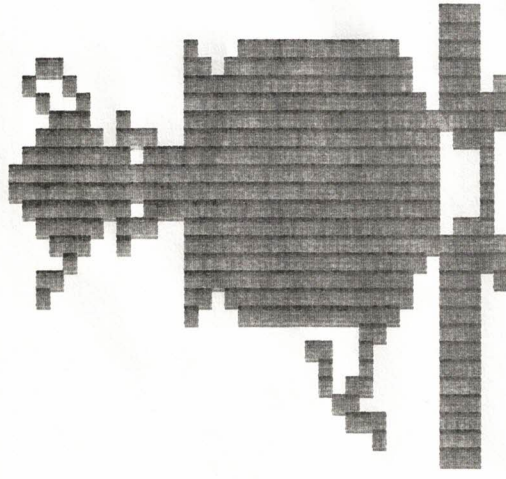


Unless you lock yourself in your room it's impossible to live long in Moscow without being swept into a whirl of social activity. Within weeks I was spending my whole time...

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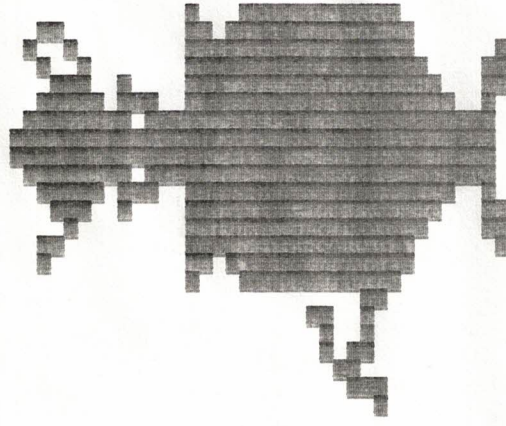
...time rushing from one to  
small social gathering to  
another.

From an exciting politi-  
cal discussion to the  
opera; from an argument  
in the Lenin Library to a  
long quest waiting to see  
the latest Tarkovsky  
film; from a guided tour  
of the Kremlin to a  
"writers' village" miles  
out of Moscow to have a  
meal with a well-known,  
slightly suspect, Russian  
novelist. The latter...

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... was an "illicit" trip since foreigners are not allowed to travel out of Moscow without permission. (The same restriction applies to Soviet visitors to London - XTRA Ed)

And then, the next day, to Peredelkino (the most famous writers' village) to meet Boris Pasternak's son. A week later I had the chance to visit the dissident, Medvedev, in his book-lined flat.

What a social whirl! Hardly any time...

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to sleep. Only the vodka  
to keep me going.

After being in Moscow a month, a  
real adventure began. The day with  
before I'd been having tea with  
some French students. Among them  
was a young Russian girl whom I'd  
hardly noticed.

Arriving home late, my head  
swimming, I found a note under  
my door. It was from the girl,  
Svetlana, offering me any sum I  
wanted to mention in the cur-  
rency of my choice, if I would  
agree to a "white" marriage...

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...with her. There was her  
phone number...nothing else.

It turned out that she, her  
sister and her mother wanted to  
leave the Soviet Union and had  
been trying to do so, without  
success, for several years.

They had been refused, partly  
because such wishes are often  
refused but mainly because  
there had been a scandal in  
France when the mother had  
fallen in love with a Frenchman  
and embarrassed the Soviets,  
especially because her...

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... husband was a KGB man  
attached to the Soviet Embassy  
in Paris.

They had been rushed back to  
Moscow in disgrace where  
Svetlana's father had disowned to  
them and disappeared in order to  
save his own career.

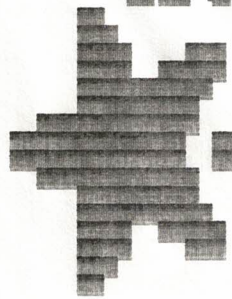
His family had been living the  
precariously ever since -- the  
mother denied permission to  
work and the family dependent on  
friends for money.

By marrying a foreigner...

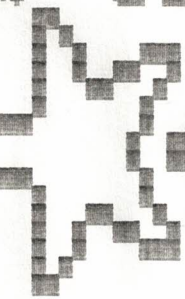
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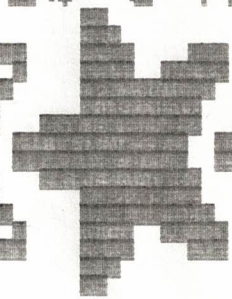
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.. Svetlana hoped to apply pressure on the authorities to help the family leave. Whites, marriages, as they are called, are often undertaken in the Soviet Union.



Always an impetuous man, I phoned the next day to arrange a meeting. Svetlana took me back to the family flat to meet her mother.



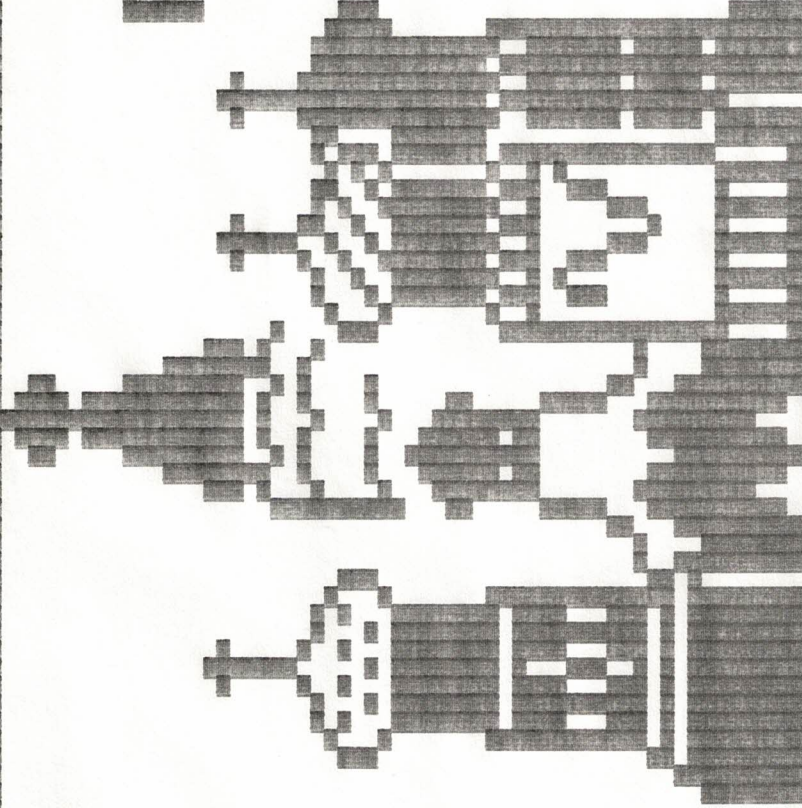
In whispered conversations held in the bathroom (yes, their flat was bugged) I agreed to marry Svetlana in order to...

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# FROM RUSSIA WITH WIFE

Part Two of  
Andrew's  
Kilgore's  
Moscow  
adventure.  
GOTO 2 if you  
missed Part One

GOTO #

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WE HAVE all heard tales of bribery and corruption in the Soviet Union, but this was like an Eastern bazaar!

At every step of the way stood a little bureaucrat who needed bribing to push us a little further on the road to getting married.

We arrived at the office where we initially had to register with large bunches of flowers. What's more, we had to find out before, through the grapevine, what the woman's name was (yes...

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...most of the bureaucrats  
were women) and what her  
favourite flowers were.

The week after we had to  
attend before a different  
woman, the director  
of the palace of  
Weddings, this time  
with her favourite  
foreign perfume (bought  
in a dollar shop).

Our conversations with  
these people were so  
very polite but loaded  
with double meanings...

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...and prevarication: we were always being "tried".

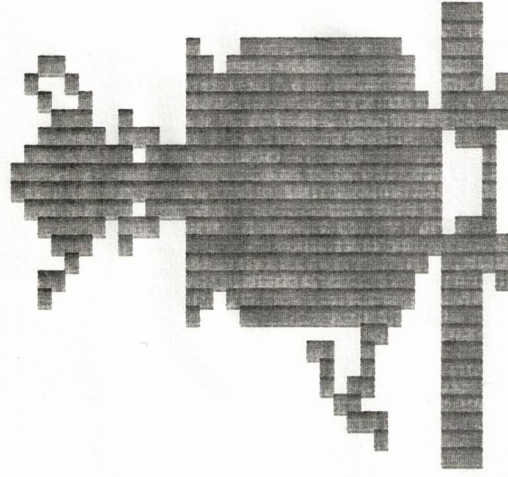
Thus, told to attend with certain papers, we would arrive and queue for three or four hours only to be told that a further paper was required.

The next day we would return with that extra paper to find that the office was closed -- they had forgotten to tell us!

Gradually, however, we wore them down. Having queued for what seemed to be months...

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..we finally had a date set for us. Just in time, as my visa was soon due to run out.

The strange this is that I'm sure they could have to delaye us long enough to ensure my visa ran out but they didn't. Why? Perhaps they wanted to extract as much agony for us and fun (and goodies) for themselves before conceding.

I prefer, however, to...

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...think, less cynically,  
that perhaps, in the  
recesses of their large  
bosoms, these women did  
feel some compassion.  
Russians are much more  
complex than they are  
given credit for.

Rules are for breaking and  
compassion is always a good  
reason for breaking them - and everyone  
gets involved. For example, after I'd  
been in Moscow for several months I  
realised that you never believe anybody  
the first time. I remember going out to  
buy some food. The sign on the food...

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..stall said Closed but the babushka was still there, counting the takings.

I asked for some sausages. "Closed", she said. "But I'm hungry", I replied. "Closed", she said. At this point I did what any self-respecting Russian would do: I turned to a passing woman and said to her, "How can I eat? This woman won't sell me any food."

When I had collected a group of Russians and we all complained heartily that it was...

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... "inhuman" not to sell me food, the woman gave up, shrugged her shoulders and asked "What do you want, young man?".

Then there's the schizophrenia of saying one thing and doing another. It certainly seemed clear that everyone knew the true nature of Svetlana's and my intentions, but nobody talked directly about it.

Nobody ever said "Is this a fictitious relationship?". Or, "If you want to succeed you..."

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... must bribe me". But that is how life is led in the Soviet Union. The whole of existence centres around dealing with the bureaucracy - getting what you can from it through bribery, but always pretending to lead an honest, incorruptible life.

The marriage at the Palace of Weddings was the most bizarre occasion. As we approached the doors they were flung open and a video camera honed in on us, remaining fixed on us through the entire ceremony. When we paid afterwards I noticed a...

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MICRONET 800 (C)

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XTRA! Feature

...charge for film, which surprised me.

"Why", I asked Svetlana, "did you order a photographer and video camera?"

"I didn't", she replied, "that was the KGB." Good grief, I thought, filming you is one thing, but actually charging you for it is pure Monty Python

It was only at that point that I really took seriously the degree to which I had been of interest to the KGB. After...

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...the wedding meal I was talking to Svetlana's uncle who has, over the years, been questioned by the KGB many times.

He related to me how, at the precise moment we arrived at the palace of Weddings, he had again been pulled in and questioned.

"What sort of fellow is this Englishman?" he was asked.

"Well", he said, "the man seems pleasant enough; he seems to have a nice smart suit!"

Two days later my visa ran...

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...out and I left Moscow on the East-West Express.

Of course, Svetlana could not come with me as she had to go through the bureaucratic process of applying to leave - and that's another long story!

Suffice it to say that, some six months later, after my mother-in-law had gone on hunger strike and the family's plight had become an issue in the Free Press, all Svetlana's mother finally left. Svetlana's mother now lives in the...

more... #

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XTRA! Feature

.. Camerouns, Svetlana is  
working as an artist in Paris  
(getting very good reviews too)  
and her sister is currently in  
Cambridge learning English.

My only regret is that my time  
in Moscow was far too short and I  
may never get a visa to revisit  
a country which fascinates me. Talk  
about the people - they are amazing.  
And the more I think about it, the more  
I realise that, small as they may be in  
statute, the Russians are as massive in  
all other ways as the buildings of  
Moscow.

There is a complexity about them that  
only a Dostoyevsky can hope to depict.  
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